

Where's Our Mountain

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Imagine returning from deployment to find that someone has broken into your home, taken your credit cards, and stolen your jewelry. Too often, we don't seek advice on how to prevent such crime until it's too late—I speak from experience.

My roommates and I had been in Puerto Rico for seven weeks. When we first returned, it wasn't obvious anyone had broken into our house. The thief or thieves were intelligent in how they executed the crime: They took smaller, more expensive items one didn't wear or use every day. So, it took a while before we realized we had become the neighborhood's latest burglary victims.

Our first clue came when I went looking for the dress watch my parents had given me for high-school graduation. I kept it, my college and high-school class rings, and other items my father had given me over the years in a jewelry box. Everything was gone.

One of my roommates discovered his watch and his grandmother's wedding ring were missing from his jewelry box. My other roommate was missing his sheepskin rug and a jar full of money.

Then, we couldn't find our case of Mountain Dew. "Those rotten #*&%\$!" I thought.

I quickly went through a range of emotions—from disbelief that we had been victims of a crime, through fear that the security of our house had been violated, to anger at whomever had felt they had the right to claim our possessions as their own. It infuriated me to think that irreplaceable gifts from my parents likely had been traded for money. I also was angry about having set myself up to be an easy victim.

After we thoroughly had inspected the house, we filed a police report, contacted our insurance companies, and re-evaluated our home security. I learned some important lessons during this ordeal. First, we were lucky to have had renter's insurance—an invaluable investment in the unlikely event of a burglary. However, it's important to maintain an accurate policy. If it has been a while since you established the amount you're insured for, you should re-estimate the worth of your possessions. Chances are you've added belongings to your household.

Second, it's a good idea to maintain an itemized list of your possessions. Keep photographs of your most important valuables. Also, write down the serial numbers of your electronic products, such as stereos, TVs, VCRs, and DVD players. You can list everything in an hour or so, and it really will ease the claims process if you ever need to file.

Dew?

Third, inspect your home to ensure there are no easy ways for anyone to enter. Don't leave your doors or windows unlocked. Placing rods in the tracks of your windows increases your home's security.

You also might consider investing in a fire- or burglary-resistant safe. Anything you can do to make it harder for intruders to steal your smaller, more expensive items is worth the investment. Safe dealers are numerous, and you usually can bargain for a good deal on a reliable brand. Floor safes offer the most protection. Whether you own or rent, consider a safe that weighs at least 250 pounds, and have it bolted to the floor—landlord permitting, of course. If you can't afford a safe from a dealer, check out home-improvement stores. They usually offer fire-resistant safes in the \$100-to-\$200 range.


Another good investment is a home-security system, which offers the maximum protection against home invasion. Opt for a system that connects your house to a monitoring station, though. Any alarm system may deter burglary, but what good is it against more persistent thieves if it doesn't alert anyone while you're away?

Before you leave home and family behind during your next deployment, let your local police know you'll be away for a time. Ask them to patrol your area of the neighborhood more frequently while you're gone.

As dramatic as this may sound, treat your home as a crime scene once you realize you've been burglarized. Opening your jewelry box or inspecting the door where a lock was jimmied only makes the police investigation more difficult. Your house may be teeming with ways for the police to identify the intruders (e.g., fingerprints and footprints).



Don't overlook your patio furniture. Once we realized someone had broken into our house but couldn't find a damaged door or window, we knew the intruders had to have entered through a small bathroom window about 7 feet above the ground. We always kept it unlocked. Our patio table was slightly out of its usual position, and closer inspection revealed a well-preserved footprint on the face of the table. The intruders evidently had used it to reach the window, then put it back.

If you've ever been a burglary victim, you know the feelings of vulnerability, fear and anger such an experience can cause. Don't be an easy target. Read the police-beat section of your local newspaper so you know what crimes are happening in your neighborhood. Crime prevention begins with awareness. Take a few simple steps to keep your family and possessions safe. 

If you're going to be gone a while, be sure to stop delivery of your newspaper or have a neighbor pick it up, along with your mail. It's also a good idea to install timers on inside lights. Motion-detector lighting on the outside is another deterrent to would-be burglars.--Shore Safety Programs, Naval Safety Center

The author was assigned to VAW-117 when he wrote this article.